The basic unit of the Chinese language is the zi (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each zi has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string zi together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each zi is pronounced in one of four tones:

1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest

To pronounce each zi below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about dress codes

合 (he2, three sides enclosed + kou3, mouth) = 吻合 (wen3 he2 = muzzle/mouth-shut) = 適合 (shi1 he2 = suit-fit): 合法 (he2 fa3 = conforming-to-law, legal/legitimate), 合理 (he2 li3 = conforming-to-reason, reasonable).

合群 (he2 qun2 = fit/join-crowd = sociable), 合作 (he2 zuo2 = together-work = cooperative) people are never 不合時宜 (bu4 he2 shi2 yi2 = not-suit-time-approve = passé).

Clothes must 符合 (fu2 he2 = conform-to-suit) 場合 (chang2 he2 = field-event = venue/occasion), otherwise 於禮不合 (yu1 li3 bu4 he2 = of-rite/propierty-not-suitable = are impolite).

Beauty-queen craves 合時 (he2 shi2 = suit-time = fashionable), 合身 (he2 shen1 = suit-body = figure-fitting), 合意 (he2 yi4 = suit-feeling/fancy = to her liking) ball-gown.

by Diana Yue